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C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 001187

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV
PACOM FOR FPA HUSO

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SUBJECT: THAILAND: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON ROYAL THAI NAVY
COMMANDER ADM SAMPPOP

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) During a February 14 meeting with the Ambassador, Royal Thai Navy Commander-in-Chief, ADM Sampop Amrapala, noted that over half of the RTN's Phang Nga Naval Base had been destroyed by the December 26 tsunami and that it would be at least six months before the facility was operational. Nonetheless, Sampop was convinced that RTN capabilities in the Andaman Sea were not seriously degraded. Sampop explained that the bulk of the RTN's budget was spent on maintenance. If he had any funds he could use to procure additional equipment, Sampop would buy surface-to-air Sea Sparrow and Anti-Submarine ASROC systems. Sampop told the Ambassador that he looks at the RTN as a force to protect the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea, not as a blue-water navy. END SUMMARY.

TSUNAMI DAMAGE

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2. (C) ADM Sampop noted that over 50 percent of the Phang Nga Naval Base, the RTN's primary facility on the Andaman Sea, was destroyed by the December 26 tsunami. He estimated that it would be at least six months before the facility was operational. That said, Sampop told the Ambassador that the RTN's capabilities in the Andaman Sea were not seriously degraded. Sampop agreed with the Ambassador's assessment that our joint/combined use of Utapao Thai Navy Air Base and our ability to quickly work together to mitigate the impact of the tsunami was only possible due to decades of combined operations. CARAT, Cobra Gold and other exercises had paid big dividends, he said.

3. (C) Sampop said that the beached Thai frigate at Phang Nga, the HTMS Kra Buri, would likely be refloated by the combined efforts of RTN and civilian contractors.

RTN BUDGET

4. (C) While quick to point out that most of the RTN's budget was tied up with maintaining existing equipment, Sampop said that if he had extra funds, he would concentrate on buying Sea Sparrows and ASROCs for the RTN's two Knox-class destroyers and Sea Sparrows for his Chinese built frigates. He noted that three engines for RTN Sea Harrier aircraft were in the United Kingdom being refitted. Once those engines return, Sampop expected to be able to use his Harriers more effectively.

NO PLANS FOR A BLUE WATER NAVY

5. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question, Sampop suggested that the RTN's primary mission was to protect the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea. He did not envision Thailand developing a blue water naval capability. Nonetheless, Sampop expressed a desire to improve RTN-USN links and said that he looked forward to the upcoming visits of 7th Fleet Commander VADM Greenert and the new PACOM Commander. He was also appreciative of U.S. Government assistance in allowing Thai cadets to attend the Naval and the Coast Guard Academies.

6. (C) During the meeting, the Naval Attache complimented ADM Sampop on the RTN's use of the VSTOL Carrier, Chakri Nareubet, in supporting relief flights to Khao Lak and Phi Phi Island. Sampop appreciated the fact that the relief flights represented the longest sustained use of the carrier since the RTN purchased the ship from Spain in 1997.

BOYCE